

HOWARD THURMAN: AN EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS OF
THURMAN'S IDEA OF COMMUNITY AND
THE VIABILITY OF THE
FELLOWSHIP
CHURCH

A Professional Project
Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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ABSTRACT

In a world of international, interracial, intercultural and interdenominational bickering, a world fraught with fear, deception and hate, there is a need to counter these forces by revitalizing the ideas of community and love. These ideas are vital to the very meaning of life itself and to man's responsibility to his God and to himself.

I develop Thurman's idea of community, based on his early experiences, his mysticism, his idea of love and his concept of the Will of God.

I begin with a brief description of his background and how he formed his early ideas of community and love, and developed them through his mystical experiences, his contacts with nature and with fellow human beings. Thurman's search for common ground motivated his efforts to examine the various fields of physical, biological and psychological sciences. I discuss community not only as a goal but as a ground of Thurman's theology and ethics.

I also include a chapter on the Viability of the Fellowship Church, giving a brief history and the present status of the Church. I summarize the results of my survey and personal interviews of members of the Church and persons formerly connected with the Church who now reside in the

Los Angeles and Riverside areas. The Church is still a viable organization in the City of San Francisco, serving the community well.

INTRODUCTION

Problem Addressed by the Project

The purpose of this project is to examine and analyze Howard Thurman's idea of community and to currently evaluate the viability of the Fellowship Church, an example of his community. He was a co-founder of the church which this year celebrated its 38th anniversary, having been established in 1944 in the city of San Francisco, California. Since 1953, the year that direct leadership of Dr. Thurman terminated, the church has been directed by eight different ministers. Now that Dr. Thurman is no longer with us, the question is, will the Fellowship Church continue to function in a similar manner as in the past? My review of its foundation, past history, past and present performance, and attitude of its membership will give new insight as to what might be expected in the future.

Importance of the Problem

The efficacy of Dr. Thurman's ideas and the viability of any institution with which he was connected are of vital concern to the world in general, because he was a world figure, and the world of religion in particular, because he was one of its outstanding leaders. Dr. Howard Thurman

(1900-1981) was known throughout most of the world as a spiritual innovator, a prophet, a poet, a liberal thinker, a mystic, a religious leader and one of America's greatest preachers. He was born in Daytona Beach, Florida, where he experienced, early in life, segregation and racial discrimination in their worst forms. Yet he refused to allow this environment to destroy his spirit. He attended the local schools, but had to leave his home town to attend senior high school because this level of education was not available to blacks in Daytona Beach. He attended and graduated from Morehouse College and Colgate-Rochester Seminary. He also studied at Haverford College under the professorship of Rufus Jones. He served as pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, in Oberlin, Ohio; professor of Religion and Spiritual Disciplines and Dean of Rankin Chapel, Howard University; and professor of Spiritual Disciplines and Dean of Marsh Chapel, Boston University. In 1944, he was a co-founder of the Fellowship Church for all People in San Francisco, California, reported to be the first truly interracial, interdenominational and intercultural Church in America. In 1965 he established the Howard Thurman Educational Trust, a non-profit charitable institution, dedicated to the education of black youth in colleges all over the country. The Trust was also dedicated to the enrichment of the religious and spiritual commitment of individuals through Thurman's written works, recordings and tapes. Howard Thurman Listening Rooms have been established in many parts of this country and in

17 foreign countries. During his lifetime, Dr. Thurman wrote 22 books, more than 50 articles and spoke at more than 600 universities and colleges. He was an eloquent speaker and attracted large audiences which he could hold spellbound.

Dr. Thurman's search for community was one of the most important of his life. He said:

For a long time it was not clear to me what the meaning of my pursuit for community would be in terms of the present tensions between black and white in American society. From my childhood I have been on the scent of the tie that binds life at a level so deep that the final privacy of the individual would be reinforced rather than threatened. I have always wanted to be me without making it difficult for you to be you.¹

At another significant point in the life of Thurman, it became clear to him, during a visit to India with his wife in 1936, that his idea of community must be implemented. He wrote:

All that we had seen and felt in India seemed to be brought miraculously into focus. We saw clearly what we must do somehow when we returned to America. We knew that we must test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers, with a carry over into the common life, a fellowship that would alter the behavior patterns of those involved. It became imperative now to find out if experiences of spiritual unity among people could be more compelling than the experiences which divide them.²

Fellowship Church was one example of Thurman's idea of community. His idea of community began in his early years and was continued and reinforced by his experiences and by

¹Howard Thurman, The Search for Common Ground (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. xi.

²Howard Thurman, Footprints of a Dream (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 24.

his idea of love. His idea of love was grounded in and motivated by his personal mystical experiences with God. This project will analyze these theological bases to his view on community.

Definition of Major Terms

Mysticism is a religion in its most acute, intense and living stage and it is a religion which has been incorporated in every other religion known to man. There is no single history of mysticism because the major historical religious traditions have been largely independent of one another and there is no way of knowing the real origin of mysticism. Mystics, of whatever religion, generally feel that their experiences are unique, somehow spaceless and timeless and that these involve an apprehension of transcendence, requiring³ a course of self-control, mastery and contemplation.

Love is the experience through which a person passes when he relates to another person at a point in that person that is beyond all good and beyond all evil. To be loved is the experience of being totally and completely dealt with within oneself at a point in oneself that is beyond all good and beyond all evil.⁴

Love-ethic, when referred to in this project, is that which is central to the religion of Jesus, the essence of which is recorded in the New Testament.⁵

Community is an expression of life in which occur wholeness, integration and realized potential; and is rooted in life itself because the intuitive human urge for community reflects a characteristics of all life. In the total panorama of the external world of nature, there seems to be a pattern of structural dependability and continuity, or what may be called an inner logic, that

³S. Spencer, Mysticism in World Religion (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 18.

⁴Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in Meditation Series, (Love as Interest), San Francisco: Howard Thurman Educational Trust, Tape #59-8.

⁵Mark 12:30, 31, St. John 3:16, 14:21, 15:12, 13, 1 Cor. 13:1-13, 1 John 3:1-24, 4:7-21, 5:1-16.

manifests itself in forms, organizational schemes, and in a wide variety of time-space arrangements.⁶

Inclusive Church is an interracial, intercultural and interdenominational organization in which the richness of diversity and pluralism are incorporated without experiencing malice, oppression, intolerance and alienation. The Church as a social institution, formally entrusted to be the trustee of the religious experience, cannot withhold itself from any man, no matter his circumstances.⁷

Work Previously Done in the Field

As mentioned previously Thurman wrote a number of books, articles, and pamphlets and delivered many sermons and speeches at many colleges and universities. He has been also the object of a number of writers, chief among whom are: Mitchell,⁸ Moxley,⁹ Smith,¹⁰ Yates,¹¹ Goodwin¹² and Bennett.¹³

⁶Howard Thurman, Search for Common Ground, p. 5.

⁷Howard Thurman, The Creative Encounter (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1972), p. 146.

⁸Mozella Gordon Mitchell, "Thurman: The Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Relationship to Literature and Theology" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, 1980)

⁹Irvin Stewart Moxley, "Thurman: An Examination of the Mysticism of Howard Thurman and Its Relevance to Black Liberation" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1974)

¹⁰Luther E. Smith, Jr., "Thurman: An American Prophet: A Critical Study on the Thought of Howard Thurman" (Ph.D. Dissertation, St. Louis University, 1979), and Luther B. Smith, Jr., Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet (Washington: University Press of America, 1981)

¹¹Elizabeth Yates, Howard Thurman, Portrait of a Practical Dreamer (New York: Day, 1964)

¹²Mary E. Goodwin, "Racial Roots and Religion, An Interview with Howard Thurman," Christian Century 90 (May 1973) 534.

¹³Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Howard Thurman-20th Century Holy Man," Ebony, XXXIII, 4 (February 1978) 68

Mitchell compared Thurman's not-so-systematic theology with that of the systematic theologians. The study involved an analysis of Thurman's literary and theological insights and examined in a general way his relatedness to the modern day treatment of conversion, in each of constructive theology, process thought, existentialism and phenomenology.

Moxley showed how Thurman supported Martin Luther King, Jr. and the entire liberation movement, much of which was not known to the average black on the street. Many blacks were highly critical of Thurman during those days, feeling that he had deserted the cause and had hidden behind mysticism. Moxley compared Thurman's thinking with that of Joseph R. Washington, Jr., J. Deotis Roberts, Albert B. Cleage, Jr. and James H. Cone. He explained that Thurman had laid a foundation for much of the structure of the movement. While there were disagreements regarding the methods and procedures of the implementation of the program, there were many more agreements on the principles and content of the movement. Thurman had a great influence on all of the leadership, in particular King. Not only did King respect Thurman's views as his senior and teacher but he internalized much of Thurman's theological concepts and was known to carry a copy of Thurman's "Jesus and the Disinherited" in his briefcase.

Smith examined Thurman's mysticism as it related to his prophetic calling. He discussed the making of the prophet. He related Thurman's personality traits with

Maslow's scheme of self-actualization and its criteria. Smith included Thurman's background, the influences in his life, his theological foundation, his prophetic witness, his authority and his prophetic mysticism. He focused on the dimensions of faith which heightened his sense of self, community and God. He also included a short discussion of the "inclusive church" and its value as a model, which is of interest to me in this paper. Thurman was not only committed to people in general, he was also committed to the organized church as an institution. He felt that the church had an assigned obligation, although it had faltered and failed in many ways. Smith indicated that Thurman had not intended that the Fellowship Church would be a social activist organization but a facilitator to individuals who would take appropriate actions in society. He did intend that the church would be a witness to show how to combat the evils of alienation, oppression, intolerance and racial discrimination. Smith raised two significant questions: 1. How useful are models which are a-typical, way out of the main stream of the culture and society? And, 2. How effective are models which are not promoted into on-going programs? I will discuss both of these questions. First the a-typicality of the church did not worry Thurman, he intended it to be a beacon of light to lead the way, and second the church does have an on-going program, which I will discuss in this paper later on. Smith further pointed out that Thurman's campus ministry was under a controlled environment and his establishment

of the church was under atypical conditions, time and place such that it could not be easily simulated in America. The traditional problems of denominationalism were not present. The question still remains, can it happen in other places in America? No duplicate of this church has come on the scene in the 38 years of existence of the Fellowship Church.

Yates provided an interesting discussion of Thurman's background, how he prepared for the ministry, his dreams as a boy, the essence of the old oak tree and Halifax river. She talks about the influences in Thurman's life, some I had not encountered in other writings. She focused on the tremendous pressures Thurman was under during the sixties, the height of the civil rights movement and how he coped with them relying on his firm foundation which was laid many years before. She brought out how Thurman was committed to the total ministry, seeking the guarantee for the civil rights of all peoples.

Goodwin interviewed Thurman and got a person-to-person accounting of his life story. She observed his many moods as he related his experiences. Thurman's grandmother's influence came through very powerfully as he relived those years. I will focus on this influence in my detailed discussion in a very analytical way. Another powerful influence in his life was the event of his father's death and the scene at the funeral and the bearing it had on his subsequent life.

Bennett, a fellow alumnus of Morehouse College, wrote an excellent article on Thurman for Ebony Magazine. He

discussed him as a shy, retiring, God-intoxicated mystic, who shunned the spotlight and discouraged personal tributes of admirers. He gave a resume of his life, his influences, achievements and his philosophy and religious convictions. He talked about the establishment of the Fellowship Church and the Howard Thurman' Educational Trust. He gave an interesting story concerning the establishment of the first Howard Thurman Listening Room which was established by Ellen Klemperer, a Quaker, in 1973, on a farm in Indiana. She is today continuing to function in this capacity and has been instrumental in establishing many listening rooms throughout the country. He related how important it was for Thurman to commune with God often while strolling along the shores of a lake, river or ocean and how Thurman could mystically tune his soul and spirit to their frequencies. He discussed individuality and universality in the thought of Thurman and how he treated these phenomena in his theology of wholeness. He says, Thurman was at home in the protestant church, the catholic church, the Hindu temple, the Jewish synagogue and the Moslem mosque, operating in the same unity of spirit and in the philosophy of "A man must be at home somewhere before he can be at home everywhere" and "men are made for each other."

Methodology

In my examination and analysis of Thurman's concept of community, I will treat the subject as both a goal and

ground of theology and ethics; this is different from any of the previously reported perspectives of his views on community. I deal with the transtemporal aspects of community and how community is related to the idea of love and how love is related to his mysticism.

Thurman's early idea of community was influenced strongly by his grandmother who was in turn influenced by her background and her African ancestors. Community was key to the existence and essence of the African religion. Its essence was contained in the statement "I am because we are." Without the community, the individual loses his essence.

I have examined the works of Thurman and the works of others on Thurman. I have visited the Fellowship Church and the Howard Thurman Educational Trust and studied the tape material under the skillful direction of Joyce Sloan, the Librarian at the Trust. I interviewed the Director of the Trust and the minister of the Church, Mrs. Sue Bailey Thurman, the widow of Dr. Thurman and Muriel Bullard, the Church historian. I also sampled by questionnaire some of the members of the church to ascertain data on their attitudes and opinions of the effectiveness of the church. I also discussed the status of the church with former members who now reside in the Los Angeles and Riverside areas. This information will be summarized and evaluated.

Thurman emphasized the idea that "the individual is a child of God and is of infinite worth". This is more or less central to his theology and ethics and the Church is

the trustee of this idea. These ideas are based on his idea of love which is motivated by his mystical community with God by means of his direct soul contact with the eternal spirit. Community is the ground, the transtemporal vitality and the goal.

Chapter 1 contains Thurman's roots and the influence of his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose. I emphasize her influence particularly because I feel that it was the most important in his whole life. She represented community to him in nature, in culture and in religion.

I will deal only slightly with Thurman's mysticism, because it has been dealt with adequately elsewhere, only to show continuity with his early life experiences and how they relate to his idea of community and his ideas of love.

I will deal more fully with his idea of love, his concept of the love of God, the love of self and the love of others. All of these relate to the idea of community and the Will of God and I relate these to Thurman's search for common ground, science and the prophet's dream.

I conclude with an examination and analysis of the viability of the Fellowship Church, the prophet's dream.

The Fellowship Church is an example of community that he was vitally interested in, only a short history is given because I think other writers have given this adequate coverage and Thurman's book on the "Footprints of a dream" gives his evaluation of the church through 1959. However not much has been written in the last 20 years and I

think it appropriate to discuss the present program and to evaluate its viability after 38 years of operation. One thing, I think, Thurman feared the most was that somehow his idea of community would become some kind of mystical Thurmanism instead of a concept and behavior in the Will of God. Thurman tried with all of his strength to get individuals to internalize these concepts as he led them to God, the source of power. So the question for the church is, how tuned in is its praxis to the Will of God? I have attempted to get a measure of this reality by sampling the membership to gain some insight of the internalization of the spirit of community. This is reported in the chapter on evaluation.

Scope and Limitation of the Project

My precise intent in this project is to examine the efficacy of Thurman's idea of community and to gain some measure of his effectiveness in motivating the internalization of this idea, having power of its own to survive in the absence of the motivating powers of the man, Thurman, himself. The Fellowship Church and its viability, currently, can provide insight in this regard. The Howard Thurman Listening Rooms are another expression and instrumentation for motivation.

I consider my work as an augmentation of the work previously reported by Luther Smith in his Dissertation and his book as discussed in a foregoing section. Smith raised some interesting questions as follows:

How useful are models which are atypical, way out of the mainstream of culture and society? How effective are models which are not promoted into on-going programs? Can the Fellowship Church be duplicated in other places in America where it has to combat the traditions inherent in racial ghettos, cultural groups and denominationalism. Can such churches be feasible models, showing in Thurman's words that, "Christianity is not powerless before the color bar"? What is the viability of Thurman's projects, now that he is departed?

This project will deal mainly with the Fellowship Church and will not attempt to assess the performance of the Howard Thurman Educational Trust, which provides a service to all who request it and has given a number of scholarships to students. Neither will I attempt to evaluate the performance of the Howard Thurman Listening Rooms which are now established in 17 foreign countries and in many places in this country. During my interview with the Director of the Trust, he informed me that it would be very difficult to get an accurate count, because many have been set up in private homes. They do have a record of many colleges and universities which have established rooms on their campuses.

Chapter 1

BACKGROUND

I believe that Thurman's grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, was the most powerful single influence in his life, because first, she was compassionate, loving and religious and demonstrated many virtues to the children and second, she taught Thurman in his impressionable years and was responsible for guiding him while he experienced community early in his life. Thurman wrote:

Looking back, it is clear to me that the watchful attention of my sponsors in the church served to enhance my consciousness that whatever I did with my life mattered. They added to the security given to me by the quiet insistence of my mother and especially my grandmother that their children's lives were a precious gift. Often Grandma would sense this awareness beginning to flag in us. When this happened--even when we were not aware of it--she would gather us around and tell us a story that came from her life as a slave.¹

These stories had a profound effect on young Thurman and especially the one in which she related the experiences she had when once or twice a year, the slave master would permit a slave preacher from a neighboring plantation to come over to preach to his slaves. She related how the preacher performed in the old tradition always coming to the

¹Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart, The Autobiography of Howard Thurman (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 20.

climax by a dramatization of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. At the end of his sermon, the old preacher would generally say: "You are not slaves! You are God's children".

Thurman said:

When my grandmother got to that part of her story, there would be a slight stiffening of her spine as we sucked in our breath. When she had finished, our spirits were restored.²

I believe that this experience of true community was probably the most powerful influence in his life. The efficacy of this experience was enduring throughout his life. Other experiences merely affirmed or denied its inherent truth. He found throughout his life more experiences that affirmed than those that denied. Thurman internalized the concept that "he was one of God's children" and nothing in this world could change that belief. He refers to this event often in his writings and indicated that he had no problem of identity since that event.

This was a great experience of community, the full awareness of which had to await his maturity of thought. Not only was community the ground of belief but the goal as well. The belief that one is a child of God, provides the essence for the fatherhood of God and the brother/sisterhood of human beings, the basic requirement for community. A very interesting dynamic took place when his grandmother stiffened her spine as she related the words "You are God's children". I believe that this act of behavior had a profound effect,

²Ibid., p. 21.

first, to Thurman, it indicated that she believed the words herself and second, it meant to him that all individuals had worth in God's sight. Later experiences merely affirmed this belief.

In other words, to Thurman, the story became alive in and through his grandmother. She became a channel for this unique experience in his life. When we think of his grandmother's roots, community and its ideas are not strange at all. In fact community is crucial to the African Primal Religions.³ In contrast to western culture, there is no separation between the secular and the religious in the African traditional culture. To the African, all life is religious, all experiences are religious experiences, whether they be ordinary, peak or mystical experiences. Religion is an expression of collective identity. Mbiti wrote:

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.⁴

To the African, religious experiences in the community meet the crises of spirit. All pretenses of self-sufficiency

³Robert C. Mitchell, African Primal Religion (Niles: Argus Communications, 1977), p. 38.

⁴John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 3.

and self-centeredness disappear. Standing inside the community, they are sensitive to the function of the tradition, the current situation and the destiny of their people. For the African, spirituality identifies and resources the community and the community in turn discloses the presence, power and love of the spirit. Together they embrace, question, experiment and evaluate to discover the truth of their religious experiences. Throughout Thurman's works, I see traces of these same concepts coming through and he gets them naturally.

Olive Schreiner

If not next in influence to Thurman, she certainly rates very high and especially in affirming his theological and social notions of community. She was a white woman from South Africa and in Thurman's mind represented the other end of spectrum. He wrote:

Her ideas have influenced my own thought at a very profound level. When I discovered that she was a South African, I became immediately suspicious and felt guilty that I was so affected by her. My initial investigation in an effort to find who she was and "how come" was urgent. I had to answer the critical question, How could a white woman born and reared in South Africa think as she thought and feel about man as she felt?⁵

Since he was introduced to her concepts some five years after her death, he had to pursue the answers to the above questions in her works and biography.⁶ He felt that

⁵Howard Thurman, A Track to the Water's Edge, The Olive Schreiner Reader (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. xi.

⁶S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner, The Life of Olive Schreiner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923)

her spirit had met his, in that she had the same reverence for life he had, the same empathy for the disinherited and the same distaste for segregation, discrimination and injustice.

Thurman further wrote concerning her:

I was profoundly moved and stirred by the power of her creative imagery. . .and finally, she possessed what comes through to me as an innate instinctual sense of the unity of all of life. It was this emphasis in her writing that was the first external confirmation of what had always been an active ingredient in my own awareness of life. As a boy in Florida, I walked along the beach of the Atlantic in the quiet stillness. . . .I held my breath against the night. . . .It was not until I read Olive Schreiner that I was able to establish sufficient psychological distance between me and the totality of such experiences to make the experience an object of thought. . . .The resulting creative synthesis was to me religious rather than metaphysical, as seems to have been true in Olive Schreiner's case.⁷

Mitchell⁸ recognized the very significant role that Olive Schreiner played in the thought of Thurman.

He was later influenced by many others whose concepts more or less affirmed his own: Rufus Jones, Meister Eckhart, Rudolf Otto, Gandhi, Tagore and others (he had already been influenced by such men as George Cross, Henry Robin, John Hope, Professor Howard, and Mordecai Johnson).

⁷Thurman, A Track to the Water's Edge, p. xxviii.

⁸Mozella G. Mitchell, "Howard Thurman and Olive Schreiner: Post-Modern Marriage Post-Mortem", Journal of Religious Thought, 38 (Spring-Summer 1981), 63.

Chapter 2

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Thurman's Mysticism

Much has been written concerning Howard Thurman's mysticism and I will not cover it thoroughly here but to merely point out how it forms a ground for his idea of love which in turn serves as a basis for his idea of community. The central fact of Thurman's mysticism is that in his religious experience he is aware of meeting God.¹ Smith, in his book on Thurman discussed earlier in this project, uses the term "Thurman's critical monistic realism".

Thurman's chief goal was to know God in a comprehensive sense: for God was grasped by his whole being or rather his whole being was laid hold upon by God, and the awareness of God was realized inclusively.² He experienced unity in this extraordinary phenomenon and was fully aware of how different the world of things and men are from this unity. He must have wondered at times whether the vision was illusory but evidences in the world of things and men continued to point to this unity. Thurman wrote:

¹Howard Thurman, The Creative Encounter, p. 23.

²Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Ethics", Journal of Religious Thought, 27 (1970), 24.

For me the key is the mystics claim of having in his encounter touched that which is vital, total and absolute. He experiences intimate meaning, but he experiences it and he is a creature in time and space caught in all the involvement of finitude and limitation.³

Thurman was well aware of his own position as he coped with the situation in his two worlds. He had experienced unity in his nature and his God and had experienced disunity in his own culture and the cultures of the world; and in his religious institution and the religious institutions of the world. What does it take to get them together? He had experienced such community of love in his communion with God and he realized that God was not only the creator of the world but was the source of that love that he experienced and that the culture and the religions were in such dire need of that love. It was important for him at this stage to realize the true essence and existence of both worlds. Love acquired in one had to be transmitted to the other. It has to be acquired before it can be given and the more one gives the more one gets. He recognized that the meaning of love must be worked out and that one who loves must come to realize that the only way of keeping the meaning of the love experience alive is by passing on one's love to another. Love is the key to community, also its binding power, its ground and its goal.

³Howard Thurman, Mysticism and the Experience of Love (Wallingford: Pendle Hill, 1961), p. 10.

Thurman's Idea of Love

Early in Thurman's quest for the meaning of love, he recognized that the love-ethic was central to the religion of Jesus. The central emphasis of the teaching of Jesus centers on the relationship of individual to individual and of all individuals to God. When someone asked Jesus, what is the meaning of all the law and the prophets, he gave them the words of the two great commandments. Jesus rested his case for the ultimate significance of life on the love-ethic. At an early stage of his life, Thurman defined love:

as the intelligent, kindly but stern expression of kinship of one individual for another, having as its purpose the maintenance and furtherance of life at its highest level. Self-love is the kind of activity having as its purpose the maintenance and furtherance of one's own life at its highest level. All love grows basically out of a qualitative self-regard and is in essence the exercise of that which is spiritual.⁴

In the second commandment, the definition of the word "neighbor" is key to the extent of the meaning of one's moral obligation. In a memorable story, Jesus defined "neighbor" by relating it to the actions of the Good Samaritan. He explained what happens when a man responds directly to a human need across the barriers of race, class, culture, religion and condition.⁵ Every man is potentially every other man's neighbor. A man must love his neighbor by meeting his neighbor and his needs where he is and permit

⁴Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1951), p. 109.

⁵Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1949), p. 89.

no barriers whatever. The love-ethic of Jesus had to extend to all, including the enemy, the Romans, the rulers and others.

As Jesus had internalized the true meaning of his love-ethic, including neighbor and enemy, Thurman realized that there was much that he needed to learn and experience in order to be able to witness to this truth. While at the Fellowship Church, which I will discuss later in this project, he realized more fully the meaning of love and that it had to be activated and communicated in order to be a witness to the God in him and for it to be meaningful in the conduct of the church as a witnessing congregation. One of the central things that he learned at that stage was that the experience of being understood by another was of primary importance. He had to expose his intimate self and take the associated risk. He said;

Somewhere deep within was a place, beyond all faults and virtues that had to be confirmed before I could run the risk of opening my life up to another. To find ultimate security in an ultimate vulnerability, this is to be loved.⁶

Thurman further developed his thoughts about love during his stay at Boston University while serving that community as Dean of Marsh Chapel. He gave a series of lectures on "love" and utilized the definition which I quoted in the Introduction. I repeat it here for emphasis sake:

⁶Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1979), p. 146.

Love is the experience through which a person passes when he relates to another person at a point in that person that is beyond all good and all evil. To be loved is the experience of being totally and completely dealt with within oneself at a point in oneself that is beyond all good and beyond all evil.⁷

Thurman believed that all love is of God and therefore to love is the profoundest act of religion, or religious faith, or religious devotion; and it is only in a secondary sense that it is an act of ethics or morality. Thurman's ethics begins and ends in religious experience which he considers as a creative encounter with God. It has been said by a number of writers, that Thurman's social ethics begins and ends in religious experience. They recognized that He did not draw any sharp distinction between the secular and the sacred and that each was metaphysically grounded in an ultimate event, involving the nature of the personality and the Being of Reality.⁸ He further wrote:

Love is what expresses the fruit of the presence of God, the unity with God and the unity with humankind, the power that overcomes the enmity among persons. This presupposes that all are within the ethical field.⁹

In this communication network, love presupposes also that parties represent freed spirits, so that each individual can see each other in the context of a common humanity.¹⁰

This is the problem Christianity faces. It has betrayed the Religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption.¹¹

⁷Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in Meditation Series, (Love as interest), H.T.E.T., Tape #59-8.

⁸Thurman, The Creative Encounter, p. 11.

⁹Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, p. 102.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹Ibid., p. 98.

In spite of all of the criticism and the misunderstanding of Thurman during the civil rights struggle, he was deeply concerned about it and particularly concerned that the Christian community had not been sufficiently active in removing the barriers of race, creed, class, denomination and condition. He felt that at their deepest levels, all persons, whether they be red, white, black or yellow desired and needed to be loved. The Christian community should be a special kind of community where all persons would have religious encounters which would relieve them of all pretenses, deceptions, fears and hates. This would motivate love and it could spread not only to engulf the disinherited but would affect the exploiters and oppressors. These oppressors, exploiters, oppressees and exploitees could learn to love and learn to build together a community or fellowship, unlimited in scope. Love would then be the norm for this community. God is no respecter of person and man needs to imitate God and do likewise.

Another very important aspect which requires consideration in order to promote acts of true love, one can love only when one meets another where the other is and as the other is and treats the other at that point as if the other were where the other ought to be. Thurman said:

I see you where you are, striving and struggling and in the light of the highest possibility of your personality, I deal with you there. My religious faith is insistent that this can be done only out of a life of devotion. I must cultivate the inner spiritual resources of my life to such a point that I can bring you to my

sanctuary, before his presence, until, at last, I do not know you from myself.¹²

Thurman reminded us that Jesus provided us with the example to follow. Some of the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman, allegedly an adultress, to Jesus to test his handling of the Old Testament law. After the allegations were made and addressed to Jesus, Jesus requested the one who was without sin to cast the first stone. Reportedly, they said nothing else, but left the scene one by one, leaving Jesus and the woman alone. Jesus then turned to the woman and said:

Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?

Then she said:

No man, Lord.

Jesus said:

Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more.¹³

Jesus met the woman where she was and he dealt with her as if she were where she ought to be. That was true love, not finding fault with all of the circumstances of the past and attempting to assess blame where blame may or may not be, but meeting the woman at a point in the woman which was beyond all of her evil and beyond all of her good. He worked with the issue brought to him and he did it effectively. Jesus' love transcended justice.

The foregoing experience displays some of the major aspects of love which Thurman deals with in his works. Some

¹²Howard Thurman, The Growing Edge (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1956), p. 22.

¹³John 8:11.

of these are: love is kind; love involves an intrinsic interest; it is long suffering; it is a touching of one's whole being; it is a contact with fellowship and it carries its own reward. Love produces a sense of respect for others, a sense of awareness and a sense of concern for truth. Love satisfies inner and outer needs and creates a climate conducive to self-fulfillment. All of these aspects are grounded in the love of God.

Love of God

Thurman believed that God is the source of all life and all love and that the Love of God is manifested in all aspects of life. He spoke:

The Love of God manifests itself in human life with a built in necessity for itself. Were it not so, we could find a substitute for it, but we can't. Everyone has in his mixture of being a need to be dealt with beyond all his status, good and evil, beyond all his faults, failures and successes. It is a natural tendency, a part of the givenness of the love of God which sees beyond all merit and demerit.¹⁴

He further wrote on the love of God:

It seems to me that this points up an important thing about the love of God. In the religious experience, the individual finds fulfilled what he has glimpsed in his other experiences of love; namely, that in the presence of his God he becomes aware of being dealt with totally. Whether he is a good person or a bad person, he is being dealt with at a point beyond all that is limiting, and all that is creative, in him. He is dealt with at the core of his being and at that core he is touched and released.¹⁵

¹⁴Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in Meditation Series (The Love of God), H.T.E.T., Tape #59-13.

¹⁵Thurman, The Growing Edge, p. 67.

This is central in the life of Thurman to have the sense of being totally dealt with, to be totally understood so that all pretenses and tensions can be relaxed; to have somebody before whom all barriers can be removed. He realized that exposure of himself was a very risky business and could result in the unexpected. All of his life, he was on the hunt to find such comfort but found that he could only feel completely free to run the risk of being himself in the presence of God. He found that his relation to God was not immediately transferable to his human relations. Thurman also thought that the Love of God was in:

the inner unity between and among forms of life, the inner unity in one's own body. I get my confidence in contemplation of harmony that is in my own body, that built-in harmony, my major systems and subsystems. . . . The whole of creation is a lung through which God breathes and there is no aspect of my existence that is not touched. . . . God waits for the homecoming of himself in me. That is what love means.¹⁶

This is an affirmation of Thurman's ethic which begins and ends in religious experience which he labels as a creative encounter with God, the creator of all life and love.

Love of Self

Thurman spoke:

Now to love one's self is to deal with oneself at a center in onself that is beyond all the faults and all of the virtues.¹⁷

¹⁶Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in Meditation Series, (Growing in Love), H.T.E.T., Tape #77-10/19.

¹⁷Ibid., Tape #77-10/17.

He wrote:

Self-love is the kind of activity having as its purpose the maintenance and furtherance of one's own life at its highest level. All love grows basically out of a qualitative self-regard and is in essence the exercise of that which is spiritual. . . .If we accept the basic proposition that all life is one, arising out of a common¹⁸ center-God, all expressions of love are acts of God.

For Thurman, self-love is a very positive aspect of love, consistent with the love of God, the two great commandments and the will of God. Self-love does not degenerate into selfish love when it is grounded in the common center-God. One thing that is crucial in his thought of self-love is self-identity. He proclaimed in a series of lectures that if he is anonymous, how can he love himself? If he does not know who he is, how can he bring love to bear on the unknown? Generally, one thinks of oneself in relative terms, expressing meanings in external manifestations and often with images of what others think or know of the one. The question is, how does one work through all the images and get to the self fact? One must accept one's self-fact as it is, separated from all the images and external influences. One must say to oneself, I must take the time to deal with myself at my center, day in and day out. I can't give up on me. I must deal with me, a unique self in creation. There is no other like me in all ages and all generations. There is no face like mine that has ever been born. This is my body, the only body I have and I can't abuse it. I cannot disown my organism, this is it. Abraham Lincoln once said, "God could have made a better

¹⁸Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, p. 109.

looking man but he didn't." I must respect, honor and love myself in order to experience the fullness and the wholeness which God has made possible. If anything detracts from my wholeness, it is a violation of my real self and a violence against God who created me. Self-love is a positive aspect of love and is in tune and is in resonance with the vibrations of God and his great commandments.

Love of Others

There, seemingly, has never been any real problem with the first of the two great commandments, reiterated by Jesus. There has been some problem through the years regarding the definition of "neighbor" as I have discussed earlier. Thurman takes the wide view of "neighbor", that every person is potentially in need and therefore potentially a neighbor. Another problem has been plaguing the Christian community through the ages, is regarding the radical demand of Jesus to love the enemies. How can this be accomplished in a secular world? If it can be accomplished, what does it take to do it? In accordance with Thurman's definition of love, it is handled routinely, the only requirement being, the willingness to risk coping with the real forces of life, those positive and creative forces¹⁹ of love which leave no substance for hate to exist, although hate continues to threaten. Thurman's idea of love draws no distinction between the bad guys and the good guys. The status of the

¹⁹Thurman, The Growing Edge, p. 5.

object, friend or foe is superseded. All are dealt with beyond all of their faults and virtues, their good and their evil. When one deals with another at a point beyond all faults and virtues, one denies the other the power of control and determination. One maintains this power in oneself and does not give the other the opportunity to dominate the situation. One is then able to embrace another as one would embrace oneself without barriers.

There are always difficulties along the way, Thurman admitted when he said:

There are some people, I don't want to love. I have not arrived at maturity in my spiritual life that I can, honestly say that I want to love everybody.²⁰

Many times, Thurman found himself in need of God's creative power to love. He said in a number of his works that there was an additional need to want to love, over and above the need to love. He says that one must have the desire to want to love and this is what he was working on continuously. To his mind, this requires a further emptying of self in order to approach this hallowed ground where only the Lord stood.

Thurman was always aware of the real possibilities of one degenerating into what he considered the Christian professional lover, one who professes to love but really remains detached as one standing on the outside of another and just watching from a far. This is not love. There is no meeting of the spirits and no meeting at the point beyond the veneers

²⁰Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in Meditation Series, (Browing in Love), H.T.E.T., Tape #77-10/18.

of life. He took this very seriously because he took seriously the demand of Jesus to love the enemy. He wrote:

God is not only the God of religion, he is also the God of life. When I love my enemy, I come closest to the perfection which is God. When I do this, I resist the temptation to act as a member of the human race with special privileges. Love your enemy, love your enemy, ²¹ love your enemy and so fulfill the will of God, in you.

Thurman wanted so much to be close to God. He wanted no special privileges. He just wanted to fulfill the will of God. He felt that Community was an agent of that will.

²¹Thurman, The Growing Edge, p. 20.

Chapter 3

COMMUNITY AND THE WILL OF GOD

Community

Community is an experience in wholeness, integration, creative synthesis and inward togetherness of realized potential and is rooted in life itself because the intuitive human urge for community reflects a characteristic of all life. Thurman wrote:

The place to look for the emergence of community in human life is in the primary social unit, the family. It is here that the child first becomes aware of himself/herself as a person. It has often been said that a child is not born human but becomes human only in a human situation or context. I take this to mean that in the intimacy of the family the profound process of the unfolding of potential is set in motion.¹

This experience of the child is substantiated by Jan Ehrenwald who writes:

At birth, the human is probably the most helpless and most dependent of all of the animals on earth. This fact necessitates a unique mother-child community relationship, the source of a profound emotional closeness and communicative intimacy between the two. The mother and child egos are still merged even after birth, the child being a direct extension of the mother's body image.²

¹Howard Thurman, The Search for Common Ground (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 81.

²Jan Ehrenwald, "Mother-Child Symbiosis: Cradle of Esp", in Parapsychology (New York: Signet Book, 1978), p. 66.

At birth, every normal baby in the world has the ability to cry and to signal for help from the mother. The mother is the omnipotent, omniscient and bountiful figure. The baby partakes of this community advantage and exercises virtual control over the mother's behavior. Any symbol of distress whimper, cry, or kicking summons the mother to the child's aid. This is called symbiotic omnipotence. It has been reported that babies who were denied such a community often perished. As this human community develops, more and more the influences of culture and religion are felt by the child. It is said that nature unites, and culture and religion separate people. Thurman recognized this fact when he wrote:

But community is the native climate of the human spirit. It is for this reason that we seem most our true selves when we are deeply involved in relations with other selves.³

but he recognized also that every situation did not provide the key when he wrote:

The key to community must be fashioned of a common understanding of life, a common faith, a common commitment. Every person is at long last concerned with community. There is a persistent strain in the human spirit that rejects the experience of isolation as being alien to its genius.⁴

This common understanding of life led Thurman to the search for common ground, an inquiry into the basis of man's experience of community. For this he engaged first in a study of the sciences to gain their contributions to the knowledge of the phenomenon of life. He wrote:

³Howard Thurman, Meditations of the Heart (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1979), p. 122.

⁴Ibid., p. 121.

The origin of life is never separated from the origin of the world. This is a most intriguing realization. . . . Always the manifestation of the continuum, or spirit is an expression of an internal order. What emerges out of the brooding formlessness called chaos, is order. Any part of nature-say a rock, a tree, or a man-is an expression of order. The relation between a rock, a tree, and a man is an expression of order. Where the mind cannot see order, it sees chaos. Chaos is always giving way to order as knowledge and insight develop.⁵

This expression of order was real in the life of Thurman, even in his childhood when he sat under the old oak tree and communed with the God of nature and as he walked along the Halifax river, he discerned an order which his later experiences had to explain. His life was an integration of theology, ethics and science and he appreciated all the contributions that each made to his understanding of life. He wrote:

The scientific theories leave out any elements that indicate a notion of intrinsic purpose or design. They seem to want to deal with the matter of beginnings without introducing the idea of a Creator or the utterly religious term, God. Any such notions are expressed, if at all, by implication. This is as it should be. For science is but one of the moods of the human spirit. It does not imply that the other moods are fatuous or futile; it does not hold that the truths it enables men to discover are the only truths.⁶

Thurman was very much interested in the contributions that science was making to the understanding of life in its search for truth, so he examined its basis for common ground.

Community and Science

One must explore the meaning of one's experience of community both as a child of nature and in relation to all

⁵Thurman, The Search for Common Ground.

⁶Ibid., p.12.

living things. Thurman wrote:

For the purpose of our discussion, life is viewed in at least two very basic dimensions. The first is life in the sense of existence of process, of manifestations--indeed of energy itself. . . .The second incredible manifestation of apparent directiveness is the fact that life on earth is very restricted in its territory of occupancy. . . .For religion, the creation accounts, myths, or query stories respond to the necessity of thought; for science the creation hypothesis undertake the same assignment.⁷

We have already discussed the child (infant) and the requirement for intimate community. This process continues as a requirement even to death. Not only is there the requirement and urge for community, there is a commonality or ground common to all at death, in accordance with medical science.

Dr. Ross reports:

The authors have studied hundreds of cases, both Hindus and Christians, Indians and Americans, to collect data to determine the subjective experiences the patients have had at the portal of death. Human experiences at this moment are alike and do not much vary depending on religious or cultural backgrounds. They are more influenced by the depth and authenticity of a belief system. Equally important is the fact that all men are alike at birth and at death, and that it is the quality of their religious identity that matters to all.⁸

This reaffirmed some of Thurman's own experiences regarding man's experience of community as a child of nature but he was further interested in man's kinship to all living things. He interested himself in the physics of nature.

Twentieth-century physics has had a profound influence on general philosophical thought because it has revealed an

⁷Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

⁸Karlis Osis and E. Haraldsson, At the Hour of Death (New York: Avon Books, 1977), p. x.

unsuspected limitation of classical ideas and has necessitated a radical revision of many of our basic concepts. The concept of matter in subatomic physics, for example, is totally different from the traditional material substance of classical physics and the same is true for concepts of space, time and causality. Dr. Hannes Alfven, the Nobel physicist at U.C. San Diego, California reported to the press on December 8, 1982, that he had collected data from space that disputed the "big bang" theory. His presentation to the American Geophysical Union included findings of space probes that have made conventional models of space obsolete.

Modern scientists now believe, as many mystics believed centuries ago and still believe, that there is unity in the universe and recent researches in nuclear energy have substantiated this belief.

Relativity theory has forced scientists to change their concepts of space and time in a drastic way. It has shown that space is not three-dimensional and that time is not a separate entity. Both are intimately connected and form a four-dimensional continuum called "space-time."

Recent computer-aided studies show that the conventional "Brownian Movement" of randomness in particle movement in a liquid can no longer be supported.

One of the main insights of the quantum theory has been the recognition that probability is a fundamental feature of the atomic reality which governs processes and even the existence of matter. The word "wavicle" has been popularized

since scientists can only specify the probabilities of the existence of wave motions and particles. There seems to be a vast incomprehensible force of interrelatedness tying all together in a universe which has unity, stability and order and is capable of possessing various patterns and diversified combinations, as man has detected and as the spirit has revealed. Science and religion both are arrows shot into the future, both seeking and searching for a greater reality, closer and closer to the ultimate. As man moves through time and space, he continues to seek community within and without, within himself and with his fellowman and with his world, and with his God. Thurman wrote:

I believe that God stands in relation to all existence somewhat as the mind in man stands in relation to his time-space existence.⁹

As Thurman said in a previous quote "for science is but one of the moods of the human spirit", the religious community must use it and integrate it into its forces for the future.

Community and Innocence

It is natural that man should concern himself with beginnings. This is a part of the curiosity of the mind. Without it there would be no exploration of the world and there would be no growth. The why and how are characteristic inquiries of the mind; they are not unique to any particular age of man, culture, or society. Contemplation concerning origins is a part of the curiosity of race. . . .The beginning of man in the Garden of Eden provides the first biblical setting and opportunity for community known to man.¹⁰

⁹Thurman, The Search for Common Ground, p. 41.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 8, 14.

The creation story had a profound effect on young Thurman, and it became a living experience when he viewed in person, the reproduction of Rodin's "Thinker"¹¹ at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. There he observed the great hand (Rodin's "Hand of God"), the long and graceful fingers, three in full view supported by the giant thumb from the back and from the front he saw deep in the palm of the hand the chaotic stuff of life, out of which came shapely bodies of human beings. The power of God's hand was able to take from the conglomerate chaos and mold a kind of order, a kind of synthesis and an integration that made sense to the mind of God and the results were the human beings, man and woman. Through the years, Thurman pondered the significance of that experience and realized this was the formation of the first human community, the transformation from chaos to order, parts made into wholes, disharmony into harmony. To him, this represented all of life because inherent in life whatever the limitations are, there stand candidates for becoming whole, becoming integrated, becoming harmonious. There seems to be something inherent in natural movements to favor the actualization of order and community.

This aspect was emphasized in a sermon series¹² on community and innocence which he divided into two areas:

1. The sense of order; and
2. The element of personal responsibility.

In the first area, he developed his idea of

¹¹Ibid., p. 10.

¹²Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in a Sermon Series (Community and the Will of God). H.T.E.T. Tape #1.

innocence and its relationship with the original community. Community was indigenous to the lives of Adam and Eve. There was perfect harmony, accord, agreement, mutuality, love and community, because they were innocent. There were no tensions, no strife, no pressures or bickering in their interrelationships and none with the lower animals. They were innocent, not aware of the forces that would upset that state of being.

Thurman wrote:

So influential has the symbolism of the Garden of Eden become in our heritage that when we wish to describe something utterly beautiful and truthful, we say that it is like the Garden of Eden. And by this we mean quite concretely that here is community, wholeness, harmony, with no invasion of the divisiveness of which discord, disharmony, dissent arise. But it is the harmony of innocence, a harmony that is given as a part of the givenness of the Creator to His creation.¹³

He quotes his definition of innocence in the sermon series as follows:

Innocence is an immediate living real sense of wholeness, unbroken harmony. It gives the individual the experience of community, inner togetherness without tension, anxiety and without struggles.¹⁴

This state of existence differs significantly from the state of ignorance which is the absence of knowledge and often carries with it the idea of intention or negligence or denial which don't exist in innocence.

The state of innocence did not survive the deception of the serpent which introduced to Eve the elements of freedom, independent action, will and inhibition. She ate and

¹³Thurman, The Search for Common Ground, p. 14.

¹⁴Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in a Sermon Series, (Community and the Will of God). H.T.E.T. Tape #3.

and gave to Adam and he ate and the kingdom of innocence was destroyed, the doors were closed and they fell from grace into the uninhibited expression of their own human will. By the act, the community was interrupted, the wholeness shattered and the harmony was broken. As a stone is dropped into the water, the ripples develop and travel far distances from the initial point of entry, so it was with Adam. His act like an arrow splitting the surface of his world which could never be the same again. Adam remained in one place but the effects of his act penetrated every place and so did the curses which affected humans and all of the animals, indicating a break in the unity of spirit in all of creation. Now man was left to seek ways of survival outside of the Garden with his innocence lost, his sense of community within himself and all of life corrupted, the victim of guilt and struggle. Thurman wrote:

The story of man's struggle on the planet, haunting him as he builds his cultures, his civilizations, as he erects his altars and makes his sacrifices before his God, is to find his way back to the Garden of Eden, which must yet be achieved. To achieve community in the midst of all the things he brought upon himself by his own deeds, things that work most against community, is to sweep past the angel with the flaming sword and build a new home in the Garden of Eden.¹⁵

It could never be the same home that innocence occupied but the commitment of life still requires a home of the highest quality possible.

¹⁵Thurman, The Search for Common Ground, p. 27.

Community and Self

Thurman's quest for self was of much greater intensity and magnitude than his quest for identity because in the matter of identity he had a great deal of help from his grandmother. She helped to provide Thurman with a strength of character and spirit when he needed it most. She taught him that there was magic in knowledge. The stories she related to him concerning her experiences during slavery had a profound impact on him. He wrote:

Then grandmother would say: the black preacher would stand up, start out very quietly and then look around to all of us in the room and then he would say "You are not slaves. . . .You are God's children" . . .When my grandmother got to that part of her story, there would be a slight stiffening in her spine as we sucked in our breath. When she had finished, our spirits were restored.¹⁶

and he further wrote:

Now that transmitted an idiom to me. And there was nothing that could happen in my environment that could ever touch this. It gave me my identity, so I didn't have to wait for the revolution. I have never been in search of identity--and I think the explanation is that everything I've ever felt and worked on and believed was founded in a kind of private, almost unconscious autonomy that did not seek vindication in my environment because it was in me. This is what I tried to pass on to my children. We have to have some way to keep from internalizing our environment's negative judgments about us. As long as I keep the environment external to me it cannot control me: but when I internalize it I become captured by it.¹⁷

He was identified as "A Child of God" but who was this child of God (self). His search for self motivated his search for

¹⁶Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 21.

¹⁷Mary E. Goodwin, "Racial Roots and Religion-Interview with Howard Thurman", Christian Century, 90 (May 9, 1973), 534.

common ground and his inquiry into the basis of man's experience of community. His search for community and, I believe, his theology is related to his concept of the transformation of the individual, the performance of which love only is capable. Also "the individual is of infinite worth" is basic. Change in society is contingent on the attitudinal change of the individual and the individual multiplied many times but social change is not enough to change the inside of the heart. What guarantees the change of the heart is the sense of being maintained in community. He wrote:

It is now time to apply my thesis to the private and collective life of man.

Truth is within ourself: it takes no rise
From outward things, what'ever you may believe
There is an utmost center in us all,
Where truth abides in fullness; and around,
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect, clear perception--which is truth.
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
Binds it, and makes error; and to know
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without.

Robert Browning, "Paracelsus"¹⁸

Reinhold Niebuhr, a contemporary of Thurman had a different view of his thesis and criticized it on the basis of his experiences and fundamental beliefs. He reminded Thurman of some of the aspects which showed defects in his thinking, of which Thurman was aware. But Thurman still felt that the individual was the key and that his experiences had taught him that spiritual impoverishment with its improper

¹⁸Thurman, The Search for Common Ground, p. 75.

sense of self, causes moral decay in society and where there was the proper sense of self, the stage was set for a moral society. Niebuhr¹⁹ pointed out to Thurman that the ethical considerations that govern interpersonal relations were not the same as those that govern intra and inter-group relations.

Thurman was not insensitive to this distinction because he realized that it takes more than the radical transformation of individuals to transform society, but the individual is the key and love is the ruling ethic for re-making the individual. Love also enters and influences the inter-relationships of individuals to accomplish community. Thurman wrote:

There is at bottom, beneath the whole structure of justice and mercy, the integrity of the moral order, based on love. In any moral order there is an inherent and inevitable relationship between the deed and the consequence. The degree to which I am willing to take my position on the moral integrity of life, to the degree am I willing to affirm in my daily life that the evil deed does not go unpunished. But I am not the avenger!²⁰

So, according to Thurman, for the individual who is ruled by love, his sacred life and his secular life are one and he needs only to seek to know himself and he can do this by and through his search for community; the experience of wholeness, of completeness, of inner togetherness, of integration and wherever this is experienced in life at that particular level, there is community. An individual experiences in his

¹⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. xxii.

²⁰ Howard Thurman, The Growing Edge (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1956), p. 83.

organism the sense of community through the functioning of his component parts which act as a system of inner continuity. Thurman²¹ indicated that we cannot know what the self is precisely, we can only experience it. The self is a discovery of the organism which emerges as the organs of the body begin to distinguish between the thisness and the thatness, between the self and the not-self. The self develops and is embraced as if the gift of other selves.

The self carries with itself the elements of crises. The child which we discussed early in this project, in community with its mother, is an excellent example of crises elements. The child's needs are immediate needs. For the little child, the time differential between the wish and the fulfillment must be close to zero, if harmony is to be maintained. If this differential is much greater than zero, the child develops tension and frustration and he/she sees and senses the enemy and he/she is up against that enemy as a disturber of harmony, of community. Negotiations for greater time differentials between wish and fulfillment is a function of growth and social development. This wish-ful-fulfillment interval must be faced by all peoples, and especially the disadvantaged who experience large intervals of time. In the case of the American Indian and the Afro-Americans, they have not yet arrived at a level where it is possible to experience fulfillment as races of humankind. Only individuals on a

²¹Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in a Sermon Series (Community and the Will of God), H.T.E.T. Tape #4.

limited scale have been able to cope with the tide and reach their individual fulfillment.

Thurman in his sermon series²² suggested how we might seek to develop self in community by linking ourselves to something that transcends all the fragmentations of our lives for which we are willing to give up everything even our lives. It must be something, purpose or cause which has an impact so crucial that we are brought into focus with some need that galvanizes the purpose for which sake, we give up everything. Thurman²³ realized that this possibility may be out of the reach of many persons who find that they cannot relate to such a cause or purpose. They may feel inadequate, having no particular talent or the cause may just be too overwhelming. They may feel helpless in face of the threatening environment. He still insists that even those people must learn to cultivate their inner lives to take time in withdrawal and seek their own depths until they strike common ground. They must overcome their difficulties, find their identity and themselves. Thurman wrote:

We have committed to heart and to nervous system a feeling of belonging and our spirits are no longer isolated and afraid. We have lost our fear of our brothers and are no longer ashamed of ourselves of whom and what we are. . . .For this is why we were born: Men, all men belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself, and he who shuts another away from him destroys himself.²⁴

²²Ibid., Tape #5.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Thurman, The Search for Common Ground, p. 104.

As we have said previously, we can't afford to internalize our environment; it can destroy us if we allow it to. Thurman repeats again his identity thesis--we are God's children. Sometimes when his grandmother said that she would, after a long silence add--"nothing else really mattered." This may appear to be a naive matter, a defense mechanism and of no special significance but to Thurman, it gave him a sense of root, that was watered by the underground river of existence. His grandmother had linked herself to something that transcended all the fragmentations of her life and was willing to give all for its purpose. In other words, she came to herself in the experience. Thurman²⁵ drew an analogy with the prodigal son, "when he came to himself" he came to his father. When you come to yourself, you come to your father and the tranquility that pervades all the levels of your existence announces, in everything you do, community, wholeness, harmony and integration.

Community and the Prophet's Dream

There seems to be an intimate connection between the view of life as seen through the symbolism of the creation story and the dream of the future as seen through the eyes of the prophet. Man has continued to dream and hope that he could point others toward future realities; restoring the harmony, the integration, the inner togetherness and the community which were lost in times past. There is that urge

²⁵Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in a Sermon Series (Community and the Will of God), H.T.E.T. Tape #5.

to return to the Garden, in every creature, although much was lost in the fall, all was not lost. Man still has his affinity to order, to law and to God who is in history but is always transcending history. On the basis of his religious beliefs, he is able to establish and maintain these affinities.

The dream of the prophet, Thurman²⁶ insists, must include two very basic concepts. First it must recognize that the individual has infinite worth in the sight of God; and second, it has to extend to all living things. Society has translated this concept in terms of the democratic dogma, social reforms and political reforms. Regardless of what value the culture may place on the individual's worth, from the religious perspective, there is an infinite intrinsic worth before God.

The most tragic thing is the individual who feels that he/she is of no account. This kind of self-rejection can and often happens to the disinherited and those with their backs against the wall. They allow the circumstances to internalize and destroy their wills to grow and succeed. There is no community, no sense of wholeness and inner togetherness possible in a society in which the individual is seen by himself as being of no account. In a society that does not have provisions for individuals to have room enough for them to experience their lives as theirs, whatever else it offers makes no difference. Thurman not only witnessed this phenomenon in society, he saw it happening in the church, not

²⁶Ibid., Tape #7.

only among the memberships but among their clergy themselves.

He wrote:

But the outsider was excluded, there being not even the hint of ecumenicity among the churches of that day. Even a visiting minister from another denomination would be denied the "Lord's Supper".²⁷

This dogma existed then and it still exists in some form today. Thurman insisted that individual experiences cannot be separated from the collective and communal experiences; they are linked together inseparably.²⁸ Meaningful and creative experiences among peoples can be more compelling than all the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and and prejudices that divide them. With absolute faith, it would be possible to multiply and sustain these experiences over a time interval of sufficient duration to the extent that any barrier that separates one person from another could be undermined and eliminated.

The second aspect was, the dream of community must be extended to all living things. Thurman was influenced in this area by Olive Schreiner of South Africa who suggested in her writings that man cannot implement, effectively, respect for each other when it excluded so much of life itself. Man cannot have respect for man if there is no respect for all of life. Olive wrote:

I can see long unbroken lines of connection. Between spirit that beats within me and body through which it acts, between mind and matter, between man and beast, between beast and plant and plant and earth, between

²⁷Thurman, With Head and Heart, p. 68.

²⁸Thurman, The Search for Common Ground, p. 55.

the life that has been and the life that is, I am able to see no where a sharp line of severance. . . .Is it not a paradox covering a mighty truth that not one slave toils under the lash on an Indian plantation but the freedom of every other man on earth is limited by it?²⁹

Olive Schreiner reasoned that if one can kill an animal without any remorse, what is to prevent one continuing the process even to include another human being. In other words, if one can put an animal outside of one's magnetic field of sensitivity, one can also put another person outside of one's magnetic field of sensitivity. Isn't that exactly what happens in wartime. The people and the nation re-define and re-establish a new field of sensitivity. The enemy is a group of human beings now outside of the field and is therefore a candidate for extinction without any remorse on the part of the offender. Offense is then defined as defense of the freedom and safety of one's own way of life. The enemy is of no account which is in violation of the concept of the prophet who sees very clearly the way this reality becomes instant fact, how community is postponed and love severed and harmony disrupted.

This condition prevails in the sacred life as well, when the church allows dogmas and doctrines to make community difficult, probably impossible for certain people and disrupts the harmony of life. Thurman spoke about this use of love:

Love may be used as a technique, a methodology, a formula, and a handle that I manipulate, while at the same time I don't participate in my soul. I can be working

²⁹Howard Thurman, A Track to the Water's Edge (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 151, 160.

on behalf of virtuous projects, but I am detached, not involved, operating a schema without heart. I may be a professional lover. My hands may be at work, while in my heart, I may have contempt for the whole process. This is the peril of the Christian church, to manipulate love as that which is effective and instrumental in bringing about the Kingdom of God, while the church itself may have no private stake in so great a fulfillment of the Will and purposes of God.³⁰

Later in his life, Thurman declared:

Through all of this I was on my own scent. The sacred and the secular were aspects of a single reality, a single meaning. At no point could a line of separation be drawn. At long last it seems to me that the customary distinction between religion and life is a specious oneMy testimony is that life is against all dualism. Life is One. Therefore, a way of life that is worth living must be a way worthy of life itself. Nothing less than that can abide. Always, against all that fragments and shatters and against all things that separate and divide within and without, life labors to meld together into a single harmony.³¹

When will this single harmony occur? It will occur when, the knowledge of the Lord fills the earth, as the waters cover the sea.

Thurman had a very enlightening interview with Gandhi of India, after which he witnessed a revelation, while travelling with his wife at Khyber Pass, between Afghanistan and West Pakistan. He said:

We saw clearly what we must do somehow when we returned to America. We knew that we must test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers, with a carryover into the common life, a fellowship that would alter the behavior patterns of those involved. It became imperative now to find out if experiences of spiritual

³⁰Opinion expressed by Howard Thurman in a Sermon Series (Community and the Will of God), H.T.E.T. Tape #8.

³¹Thurman, With Head and Heart, pp. 268, 269.

unity among people could be more compelling than the experiences which divide them.³²

The Human spirit is a proving ground for the Divine spirit. The Community is a proving ground for the idea of love. The Fellowship Church is a proving ground for the prophet's dream.

³²Howard Thurman, Footprints of a Dream (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 24.

Chapter 4

THE VIABILITY OF THE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

The Church

In the course of history, the word "church" has been used and misused; it has been used honestly and dishonestly, to identify organizational structures and institutions whether or not the true spirit pervaded.

Dulles says, in his "Models of the Church":

Theologically, the term "church" refers to the mystery of Christ as realized in the community of those who believe in him and are assembled in his name. The word "Church" is a mystery of grace, not knowable independently of faith. It is not a purely human thing, it is the work of God, who is present and operative in the Church through the Holy Spirit. Sociologically, the church is a fact of observation, accessible to persons who do not have faith.¹

From the ethico-theological perspective, the "ekklesia" is not first a voluntary association but a community of moral decision making. The five main functions of the Church in regard to its historical formation, include, the following according to Oglesby:

1. Kerygma, the proclamation of the Word, the preaching of the gospel which frees men and women from pride and sinful presumption,
2. Didache, the office of teaching, and reflection upon agape love within the household of faith as well as in public life.

¹Avery Dulles, Models of the Church (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), p. 115.

3. Diakonia, the enabling task of ministry in the service of the Kingdom of God in the world--especially the practice of justice,
4. Koinonia, the radical formation of the new community in Jesus Christ, grounded in God's righteousness and mercy, and
5. Cultural metamorphosis, the formation of new values which brings about socio-cultural change in the light of God's transformation of the world. Now the relation between these functions is not static but dynamic. Each exists in relationship to the others. The pattern is one of interdependence in regard to the Church's mission in the last quarter of the 20th century.²

Thurman defines church in a different perspective and does not make any sharp distinction between church, with little "c", and Church, with big "C" because, as explained previously, his theology and ethics are combined into one. He says:

The ideal that is fundamental to the Jesus idea, as we have defined it, is a vision of all men as children of God and the church as a social institution formally entrusted with this idea in our society cannot withhold it from any man because of status, of class, of any social definition whatsoever.³

The crux of this aspect of the discussion treats of the religious institution as the place in which love in all its meanings would be fostered as a result of the religious experience of which the institution is officially the trustee. It is on this point that the challenge rests.⁴

Think of it! A religious fellowship in which the central emphasis would be the worship of God in whose presence men and women of whatever pattern of living and orientation might be merged into increasing moments of inclusiveness.⁵

²Enock H. Oglesby, "Current Trends in Theology: Bold Realism or Visionary Hope in the 80's?" Journal of the Inter-denominational Theological Center 8:1 (Fall 1980), 52.

³Howard Thurman, The Creative Encounter (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1972), p. 146.

⁴Ibid., p. 12.

⁵Ibid., p. 150.

The above indicate the very firm convictions of Thurman, that the church is the trustee of religious experience and to be in the Will of God it must of necessity be "inclusive". What if the church fails in its purpose? What then? Thurman had seen many churches which operated on the principle of exclusivity and thereby violated the Will of God. He was not willing to give up on the church, no matter its difficulties in the past. He considered God to be more powerful than all of the divisive forces of "exclusivity". He said:

All the days of my life, I have heard men say that God is absolutely dependent upon the Church to spearhead His Will and establish His true purposes among men; if the Church fails, God is exhausted, and there is no other means at his disposal. This seems to be essentially unsound; even men are more resourceful than that.

Once upon a time, John remarked that if men were silent, then even the rocks would cry aloud. . . .God is infinitely more resourceful and creative than any expression of life, however profound and exceptional that expression of life may be.⁶

Thurman chose to work within the church structure, though he had vowed in his youth not to have anything to do with the church. This was a youthful, short tempered, response to the situation at the funeral services for his father. He was affirmed in his convictions about the Church's responsibility by the experiences he had including the conference with Gandhi and the Ceylonese student. After this he was more and more convinced in his inner spirit that the Christian Church, for one thing, was not powerless before the color

⁶Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1951), p. 39.

bar and that the Gospel of Jesus would affirm it in spite of the conventional Christian church attitudes and praxes.

The fellowship Church was and is a proving ground for the prophet's dream. This year, 1982, the Church celebrated its 38th Anniversary with some very impressive events. The following is a very brief history of the Church and following that an examination of its present status.

A Brief History of the Fellowship Church

The Inaugural services for the Fellowship Church were held at the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco, California, on Sunday afternoon, October 8, 1944. Dr. Alfred G. Fisk, a Presbyterian clergyman, a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State College and co-founder of the Fellowship Church gave an address on the topic "A Venture in Christian Fellowship". Dr. Thurman presented the major address entitled "A Vital Religion in the Modern World". The Fellowship Church occupied the vacated Japanese American Presbyterian Church under the sponsorship of the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church who agreed to underwrite the sum of \$3,600 a year, salaries for the two clergymen. The membership grew from less than 50 members in 1945 to well over 200 active members in residence in 1953, during which time, there was often standing room only on Sunday mornings.

There were two kinds of memberships; the members in residence and the members at large which numbered over 1,000.

The church had a policy of allowing members, who desired, to keep their membership at their regular church while at the same time participating in the programs at Fellowship Church. This was known as dual membership. In the beginning there was no formal dogma or discipline but it was soon discovered that there had to be some kind of commitment and intent expressed by the membership. A very general document was drawn up and voted on by the membership. The Motto was "the growing edge" and an ivy was pinned to the lapel of the new member at the entrance day Sunday.

At the end of WW II, the Japanese were returned to San Francisco and the Church had to find another location. They finally located the property on Larkin Street where they now are located. The second half of the church's first decade brought a vastly enlarged congregation and the church began to play a significant role in the life of the San Francisco religious community. Word of the success of an interracial, non-denominational and intercultural congregation spread nationally and internationally and several thousand names were added to the mailing list. Informal relationships with the Buddhist and Jewish communities flourished along with the congregation's Christian relationships. From the beginning, an emphasis was given to the place of the arts in religious life, with music, liturgical dance and choral reading enjoying special favor.

The Fellowship players sponsored drama programs and were responsible for integrating the San Francisco theaters.

To this day the rewards of cultural pluralism and an emphasis on the arts remain important to the church.

In 1953, Dr. Thurman left the Fellowship Church to become Professor of Spiritual Disciplines and Resources and Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. From then to now, the church has had eight different pastors and administrators namely: Dr. Dryden Phelps, the Rev. Francis Geddes, the Rev. John D. Mangram, the Rev. H. Don Guynes, the Rev. John A. Taylor, the Rev. Daniel Panger, the Rev. Paul Chaffee and the present pastor, Rev. Marvin Chandler, who also serves as the Director of the Howard Thurman Educational Trust.

In terms of membership and influence, the sixties and the seventies have witnessed a falling away. After a third of the century, the "experimental" integration which marked the congregation so uniquely no longer causes the ripples it did before the days of the 1954 Brown vs. Education Supreme Court decision, affirmative action, and the rise of ethnic identity.

Ministerial leadership, though it has all come from the Protestant Christian tradition, has run the gamut from Baptist to Unitarian so that diversity rather than continuity has marked church activities.

After about 12 years at Boston University, Dr. Thurman retired and returned to San Francisco after some travels, but did not return to the pastorate of Fellowship. He devoted his time to the establishment of the Howard Thurman⁷ Educational

⁷Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 259.

Trust and to writing books. The Trust was dedicated to the education of black youth in colleges all over the country, but primarily in the Deep South; it was also dedicated to the enrichment of the religious and spiritual commitment of individuals who would be helped by the collection of his books, pamphlets and other writings.

The Present Status of the Fellowship Church

October 8, 1982, marked the 38th birthday of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. The Fellowship Church was born during tragic times, a time when our country was involved in total war, a time when people were programmed to lay aside their ideas of community among nations and concentrate on the defeat of the enemy in Europe and in Asia. This was a time of great challenge to the ideals of Fellowship Church. Today, there is still a great challenge represented by the conflicts and frustrations among the peoples of the world and these are continually being reinforced by religious, cultural and racial biases.

The Fellowship Church felt a great need to reaffirm their commitment to a growing understanding of all peoples as children of God and for a vital experience of God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth and other great religious spirits; to gather together to share in the spiritual growth and ethical awareness of men and women of varied national, cultural, racial, and creedal heritage, united in a religious fellowship. They thought that only in this way could they rededicate themselves to the working out of God's purposes.

In this spirit, the Church organized its 38th Anniversary Celebration into a program for the month, October, 1982. The Anniversary Month Committee included: Sue Bailey Thurman, Anne A. Livingston, LeRoy N. Jackson, Mary A. Miller and Robert L. Reece. The program consisted of the following:

October 3, 1982

Joint services with the Buddha's Universal Church, a long time tradition of intercultural and interfaith worship.

Principal speaker: Rev. Frederick Hong, a distinguished minister of the Church.

Music: Buddha's Universal Church Youth Choir

October 10, 1982

Fellowship Church's Founding Day Celebration, dedicated to Dr. Fisk and Dr. Thurman, co-founders of the Church.

Principal speaker: Rev. Marvin Chandler, minister of the Church and Director of the Howard Thurman Educational Trust.

Special guest: Rev. D.S. Coade, minister.

Music: The Fellowship Choir combined with members of the Baptist Church Choir

October 17, 1982

Layman's day

Principal speaker: Dr. Herman Blake, a long time friend of Fellowship Church, Founding Provost of Oakes College at the University of California, Santa Cruz, nationally known sociologist and specialist on the Gullah speaking Afro-American sea islanders of South Carolina and Georgia.

Music: Henrietta Davis, soprano soloist. Fellowship Church

October 24, 1982

United Nations Day, in celebration of the theme--Peace, Love and Freedom. Celebrating the 800th birthday of St. Francis of Assisi, Peter Fitzsimmons performed an impersonation of St. Francis.

Principal speaker: Mr. Dorwin Jones, founder and director of Meals on Wheels, who spoke on his program of assistance.

Peter Fitzsimmons and Ishvani, director of the International Dance Theater, performed with their interpretation of the theme of the day.

Music: Youth Chorus of the Fellowship Church and the Choir

October 31, 1982

Reunion Sunday, reunion with old friends of the Church

Principal speaker: Rabbi Saul White, Congregation Beth Sholom, a wise and witty human being, a long time friend of the Fellowship Church.

All Chairpersons of the Board of Trustees and all members from the founding years were honored.

Music: Gerald Rhoden, tenor soloist, Fellowship Church

The diversity of the above programs is an indication of the inclusivity which the Church has attempted to maintain throughout those 38 years. This has helped the Church to remain a viable entity in the community of San Francisco. It has tried to keep its centrifugal force in the community, its integration and wholeness in providing a beacon for others.

I, personally, attended the worship services on October 17, 1982, in the sanctuary located at 2041 Larkin Street, San Francisco, California, and heard the address by Dr. J. Herman Blake. There were 31 persons attending that service. I was told that on the previous Sunday there was an overflow crowd in the auditorium which ordinarily seats approximately 200.

I have interviewed a number of the members of the Church, including the historian, the results of which are

reported in the chapter on Evaluation. I was informed that the ethnic ratios have changed somewhat. In 1953 the percentages in membership were: 60 percent caucasian, 35 percent black and 5 percent others; now in 1982 the percentages are 47 percent caucasian, 50 percent black and 3 percent others. The Church still has a large membership characterized as members-at-large.

Chapter 5

EVALUATION

Community

Community was not only the goal but the ground of Thurman's theology. I have discussed and analyzed his idea of community, based on his mysticism, on his idea of love and with respect to his idea of the Will of God. These have been related to his overall view of the idea that "All life is unity", which was referred to earlier as his own testimony. Further, community is innate to life because as Thurman repeated a number of times, "man existed before dogma introduced division" and "community transcends dogma." Thurman demonstrated this in our discussion of creation in the section on community and innocence. God created a community in perfect harmony, integration, wholeness and unity. Community was never denied even in the fall of man there was still the urge for community, to return to the garden, to return to a new integration, a new wholeness and a new harmony.

Man was not made to be separate from each other. Individual experiences cannot be separated from collective and communal experiences; they are linked together inseparably. Community is an integral part of the basic aspiration

of the human spirit, and is its native climate. It is for this reason that we seem most our true selves when we are deeply involved in relations with other selves. Man must share in a common understanding of life with others or another like himself. He must have free and easy access to persons who are immediately significant to him if he is to share deeply in community.

In Chapter 3, I referred to Thurman's discussion of Olive Schreiner's "reverence for life" and her influence on him. She mentioned that to put animals outside of one's magnetic field of sensitivity was the first step which is often followed by doing the same things to human beings. So if one killed an animal without remorse, one is capable of eventually killing a human being. This magnetic field analogy is interesting as the innateness of community is analogous to the innateness of magnetic forces between two bodies. The amplitude of this magnetic force is proportional to the product of their strengths at their centers of mass and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between their centers. This means that the stronger the two bodies are and the closer they are together, the stronger the magnetic forces are. The more fulfilled two individuals are and the closer they work together and interrelate, the greater the bond of community. It is nature demonstrating itself in two similar aspects.

Thurman ended his book on "The Search for Common Ground" with the statement, "For this is why we were born:

Men, all men belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself and he who shuts another away from him destroys himself."

In earlier chapters, I pursued the idea that community was the proving ground for love and that the Fellowship Church was the proving ground for the prophet's dream of community. This was based on the fact that Thurman insisted that the church must be held accountable for its Divine function, as trustee of the idea that all men are children of God and therefore of the religious experience which they encounter.

As trustee of this great idea, the church with all of its difficulties, must somehow deal with the problems of nature, culture and religion. Thurman knew the history of the churches in America and was under no misapprehension concerning their performance in meeting the challenges of the day. He was likewise aware of the problems that The Fellowship Church faced and made the following comment after being questioned at one of his lecture series (the question of leadership in the peace movement, economic justice, world law, etc. coming from the spiritual community):

I am also concerned about that. First, I have long since abandoned any hope that from the institutional arrangement--whether it is Church or Corporation or any of these things. The initiation for the changing social order will take place. I think however, each person and I speak for Howard Thurman--that each person has to select where he or she will take his or her stand and give witness of his life in terms of his faith and his dream about the kind of world in which he or she would like to live.

In recognizing the problems of the institution, Thurman took the opportunity to emphasize his idea of the infinite worth

of the individual in the sight of God. Thurman's thesis is, if a large number of individuals internalize this idea, the social structure or institution would have to respond and the difficulties which Niebuhr emphasized would be transcended.

The same concern is inherent in the question which Smith raised in his book and dissertation and was referred to earlier in this project. How useful is the Fellowship Church as an atypical example? The same individual treatment used by Thurman applies to the church. It is one among many. How can it generate any efficacy? Thurman answered this question by saying "by being a beacon". Thurman said:

From what has been said, I do not mean to suggest that there has been any great social shift in the city because of the existence of Fellowship Church. These specific illustrations simply point out some of the ways by which the people of our land can at last find freedom in democracy. The existence of the church has become a beacon of truth in the minds of many, many people who in their entire lives will never enter its doors nor be involved in its programs, but who, nevertheless, come to know from our experience that the unity of fellowship is more compelling than the superstitions and creeds that separate.¹

The purpose of a beacon is to light up the way for travellers to see as they go into the future, so the Fellowship Church, a beacon for 38 years, is the social institution which lights up the way for the individual who becomes the arrow which is shot into the future. The theory is that if enough arrows are shot into the future, a telling effect will result in the institutions themselves which are composed of individuals and will also affect their interrelationships, where some of the major problems occur.

¹Howard Thurman, Footprints of a Dream (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 125.

Smith raised another question, can the Fellowship Church be a feasible model showing that Christianity is not powerless before the color bar? The Fellowship Church in existing for the last 38 years and having some effect on the community, certainly attests to the fact that it is a feasible model for the community of San Francisco. Whether it could be a feasible model for any American city is still questionable. There have been times when the viability of the Fellowship Church was in question, Thurman witnessed to this in his writings. This was taken as a problem of the implementation of the idea not the idea itself. Can the viability of the church be determined in quantitative terms or must it be qualitative?

The Church has been viable for 38 years, how do we estimate its viability today? We can look at its ideals, its membership, its attendance records, its programs, its leadership and the effect the church has had on its members and the community. All of these aspects can contribute to some measure of the Church's viability.

An examination and analysis of the ground and bases of the Fellowship Church as interpreted in this project clearly show that its ideals are consistent with the Gospel of Jesus.

Its membership is a dual type that is a member can choose to be a member-in-residence or a member-at-large and at the same time maintaining membership in one's original Church. Members in residence reached a peak in 1953, the year Thurman left to go to Boston University and the members

at large numbered over a thousand. There was a slight decrease in these numbers over the past decades.

The average attendance at the services now is approximately 35. The Sunday I attended the services there were 31 persons in the audience. The previous Sunday service was in celebration of the anniversary and there was an overflow crowd in attendance.

The Church has a viable program for its adult membership. It has been criticized because of its lack of a vibrant youth program to train youth for future leadership in the church. While the Church encourages the youth and puts on a special program but some still feel that youth deserve a more integrated part of the intra-structure of the church.

The leadership of the church has been very capable in the past. At the present, Rev. Marvin Chandler is a part time pastor of the church and is also serving as the Director of the Howard Thurman Educational Trust. The Church is interested in obtaining a full time pastor. Rev. Chandler is the 8th pastor to succeed Dr. Thurman at the Fellowship Church. While changes in leadership have been somewhat disconcerting to some, others have found the experiences rewarding. Rev. Chandler is doing an excellent job at both the Church and at the Trust.

The last of the aspects relating to the viability of the church at the present time is its effect on its members, past and present and on the community in general.

Results of the Survey and Interviews

The results of the survey among a sampling of the membership and the interviews I had after the church services and with members now living in Los Angeles and Riverside, gave me some insight into this last aspect. A tabulation of some of the replies to some of the questions on the survey sheets is presented in the Appendix. I will only summarize some of these statements.

Each survey reply indicated that each member wanted the program of the church to continue as in the past. It had meant a great deal to them. It had made them extremely aware of others and had significantly increased their tolerance for other people's religion and ideas. They appreciated the times taken for meditation, quietness and the words of enlightenment.

What I gained from the personal interviews with persons in the Los Angeles area and in the Riverside area, could not all be written in the records. I witnessed their zeal and enthusiasm as they discussed the different phases of the church program and the church in general. They in general expressed the need for the continuing program at the church and the degree of their internalization of the ideals of Fellowship Church. They wished that they could transfer those ideas to everybody they meet. They indicated to me that they attempted just that everytime they got the opportunity. This aspect, I think, speaks more to the true viability of the church than any of the other factors that I have discussed. Do the ideals of the church live in people?

The Fellowship Church is not the building on Larkin Street in San Francisco but is the spirit that dwells among people who have internalized its ideals.

The survey and interviews showed that the Fellowship Church has had a profound effect on the community. It has shown the community that interracial, intercultural and interdenominational programs do work and have worked in the church for 38 years and are still working today regardless of the prevailing conflicts and frustrations in society in general. It has lead the community in being tolerant of others and the religions and beliefs of others. It shows the community everyday that there are more reasons to integrate than to separate. One of the members in an interview gave a very descriptive illustration of the Church. He said that the Church was like a canal, rather than a reservoir or a swamp, for the community. This was profound. He indicated that Dr. Thurman preached a sermon one time on the Canal, the Reservoir and the Swamp. The Fellowship Church should be a canal to conduct, and not inhibit, the flow of love and community to the outside community. This gives the church and its members the idea of a force always moving out to others. The contrast was made between a centrifugal force and a centripetal force. Thurman wanted always that the church would be the former and never the latter. The centrifugal force is a force that is always moving out and away from the center of mass, while the centripetal is a force that is pulling always toward the center of the mass. Some

conventional churches are representatives of this kind. They are those who selfishly pull people in and indoctrinate them in some discriminatory dogma to the exclusion of other dogma. Denominations are made this way and often they can't tolerate any other. Thurman was always aware of this kind of practice of exclusivity. Some churches become examples of reservoirs that just hold people and doctrines and when practiced to the extremes, literally separate themselves from other denominations and creeds and people in general and in the process sometimes perish themselves. These, according to Thurman, become swamps where the living enter but never return. He wanted so much that Fellowship would escape these limiting characteristics of institutionalization.

At the end of my interview with Sue Bailey Thurman (Mrs. Howard Thurman), she said a very profound thing to me as I was leaving her doorway. She said "Howard never took his eyes off God". To that I could only say, Amen, Amen and Amen. I have been examining and analyzing that statement from time to time, since that event. I recalled how important Jesus and the Gospel, his fear of Thurmanism, the two great commandments and the sensitivity and the natural tendencies of man, were to him. Thurman saw Jesus as one who never took his eyes off God. (Jesus repudiated the man who called him good. Only God is good). Jesus was a proclaimer of God and wanted the people to see God through him, but they often worshipped the man Jesus (proclaimer) and not the God he proclaimed. Had not Jesus been God incarnate, they would have missed the boat.

Thurman had a fear that his activities, the Fellowship Church and etc. would take on a kind of Thurmanism and he worked hard to dispell this thought. When people take their eyes off God, their eyes must look elsewhere and then to a human being to worship or revere. This is the danger into which all public figures run.

Thurman, in my examination and analysis of his idea of community and love, showed great reverence for the two great commandments that Jesus proclaimed. To satisfy the first commandment, one must keep his eyes on God and to satisfy the second, one must touch and serve others to implement the first. He said:

Love creates community. Love, the will to love and community are of God. Man implements his love of God through his neighbor, because the only refuge a man has, other than God, is in another man's heart. Jesus was Real Man. The question for other men is, will you keep the door of your heart open, as he did, so whoever knocks may enter.

This was Thurman's dream for the Fellowship Church and for all human creatures.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS

The following is a statement quoted in the body of this project which I think summarizes Thurman's theory and praxis concerning his ideas of love, community, the Will of God and his dynamics of fellowship:

For this is why we were born: Men, all men belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself, and he who shuts another away destroys himself. Let all the people say Amen.

Thurman was convinced in his later years that it was possible to develop a religious fellowship which was so unifying in its quality that the barriers originally separating its members one from another will gradually disappear, leaving in their stead a new sense of community. He had witnessed a shift toward a greater sense of brotherhood among the Christian churches than there was in his early days, especially in the Protestant churches in America. He wrestled with the remaining difficulties involved in race, culture and religion and continued to point up the great incongruity in religious experience which should be the greatest uniter but had become the greatest separator of man from his brother.

The Fellowship Church is still a very viable institution and serves as a beacon, lighting up the way for individual

travellers of the future. The zeal and enthusiasm of the people that the Church has touched, the present members in residence, the many members-at-large, former members and friends will be felt throughout the community and the world.

Community is essential to the individual and the individual is essential to community. Neither can have essence without the existence of the other.

"He never took his eyes off God" is a challenge to the Fellowship Church, all churches and every human being.

Thurman often referred to the prophets and especially Isaiah. I conclude this project with a saying in one of his sermons when he referred to Isaiah 11:9 as follows:

"Community on the earth will be realized fully when the knowledge of God fills the earth as the waters cover the sea."

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APPENDIX

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Gender: Female _____ Male _____
2. Age: _____
3. My nationality is: _____
4. Place of birth: _____
5. Children: _____ Ages: _____
6. Place where childhood and adolescent years spent: _____
7. Place where adult life spent: _____
8. My occupation: _____
9. Would you send your children to Fellowship Church School?

10. My educational attainment, highest grade level: _____
11. College degrees held: _____ School: _____
12. Present marital status: _____
13. Religious preference: Previous _____ Present _____
14. Present residence, how long? _____ From _____ to _____
15. Member of Fellowship Church: How long? _____
16. Type of membership: _____
17. I first heard about Fellowship Church, when? _____
18. I heard through whom? _____
19. I was influenced to join Fellowship Church by whom: _____

20. I have served the Church in the following capacity:
Minister: _____ Assistant Minister: _____ Teacher: _____
_____ Youth Work: _____ Choir Participant: _____
_____ Other: _____

21. The aspects of the church I like: _____

_____.
22. The aspects of the church I dislike: _____

_____.
23. I think the church should emphasize more of: _____
_____.
24. I think the church should emphasize less of: _____
_____.
25. My first impression of the church has been borne out by
experiences: _____
_____.
26. My first impression of the church has not been borne out
by my experiences: _____
_____.
27. What I expect to do for the church is, are: _____
_____.
28. What I expect the church to do for me, is, are: _____
_____.
29. The community has had the following effect on the church:
_____.
30. The church has had the following effect on the community:

_____.
31. Any additional comments: _____

_____.

SOME REPLIES TO QUESTIONNAIRE

The foregoing forms were sent to a sampling of the membership of the Fellowship Church. It was determined that current membership opinion and understanding of the status of the Church would be a valuable supplement to all of the written materials, books, pamphlets and Church records in determining the status and viability of the Church, and to gain some insight about the future of the organization.

The following is a sampling of the replies to some of the questions which I consider important to my evaluation:

Age:

Children:

Member of Fellowship Church, how long?

I was influenced to join the Church by whom?

The aspect of the Church I like:

The aspect of the Church I dislike:

What I expect to do for the Church:

What I expect the Church to do for me:

The community has had the following effect on the Church:

The Church has had the following effect on the community:

Age:

55-83 years

Children:

0-2, all grown and live out of town

Member of Fellowship Church: How Long?

24-36 years

I was influenced to join the Church by whom?

Impact that Dr. Thurman and Dr. Fisk had on me. Dr. Fisk was one of my teachers at San Francisco State College.

I met Dr. Thurman when he was Dean of the Rankin Chapel at Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Friends, myself.

The aspect of the Church I like:

The Church presented many thought provoking social concerns and was not afraid to discuss sensitive topics.

I liked all the programs of the Church.

I felt at ease at its programs and during the discussions.

The aspect of the Church I disliked:

Lack of youth.

What I expect to do for the Church:

Support its programs and all of its efforts because they are good for our membership and the community.

Help it to help others.

Support it financially.

What I expect the Church to do for me:

To continue its programs as in the past.

To continue to mean what it has meant to me for the last 31 years.

To continue to provide me with a sanctuary where I can come and be in quiet meditation, in spiritual development and social enlightenment.

To provide me with a place in which I can share in the search for a better understanding of God.

The Community has had the following effect on the Church:

It has acted as a challenge and a stimulus to the program at the Church.

Through the years, the Church has been a beacon in the community. The community provided tests for the Church's emphasis on integration, self-fulfillment and wholeness combining the essence of the secular life with that of the sacred life.

The community has caused the Church to seek more responsive roles in concerns vital to its people.

The Church has had the following effect on the Community:

It has shown the community the importance of the need that the Church works to satisfy.

It has made the community aware of the necessity of internalizing the ideals of the Church and implementing its goals.

It has shown the community that interracial, inter-cultural and interdenominational projects do work and they have been working for 38 years at the Church. It allowed members to make positive contribution to the community.

It proves everyday that love conquers hate if given the chance.

Our Church is asked to provide our sanctuary for various activities, secular and sacred alike.

When visitors come they are inspired by the messages they hear and they see people of various racial groups sharing hymnals, singing together, visiting congenially after Church, they are impressed and go out and tell others who also come to see.

Some people have reported how surprised they are to see how tolerant this Church is with regard to religious freedom and tolerance in general which they found nowhere else in Church society.

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